

BAYOU CHENE

*The Life Story of an
Atchafalaya Basin Community*

By Benjamin Maygarden
and Jill-Karen Yakubik

Preserving Louisiana's Heritage ♦ Two

1999



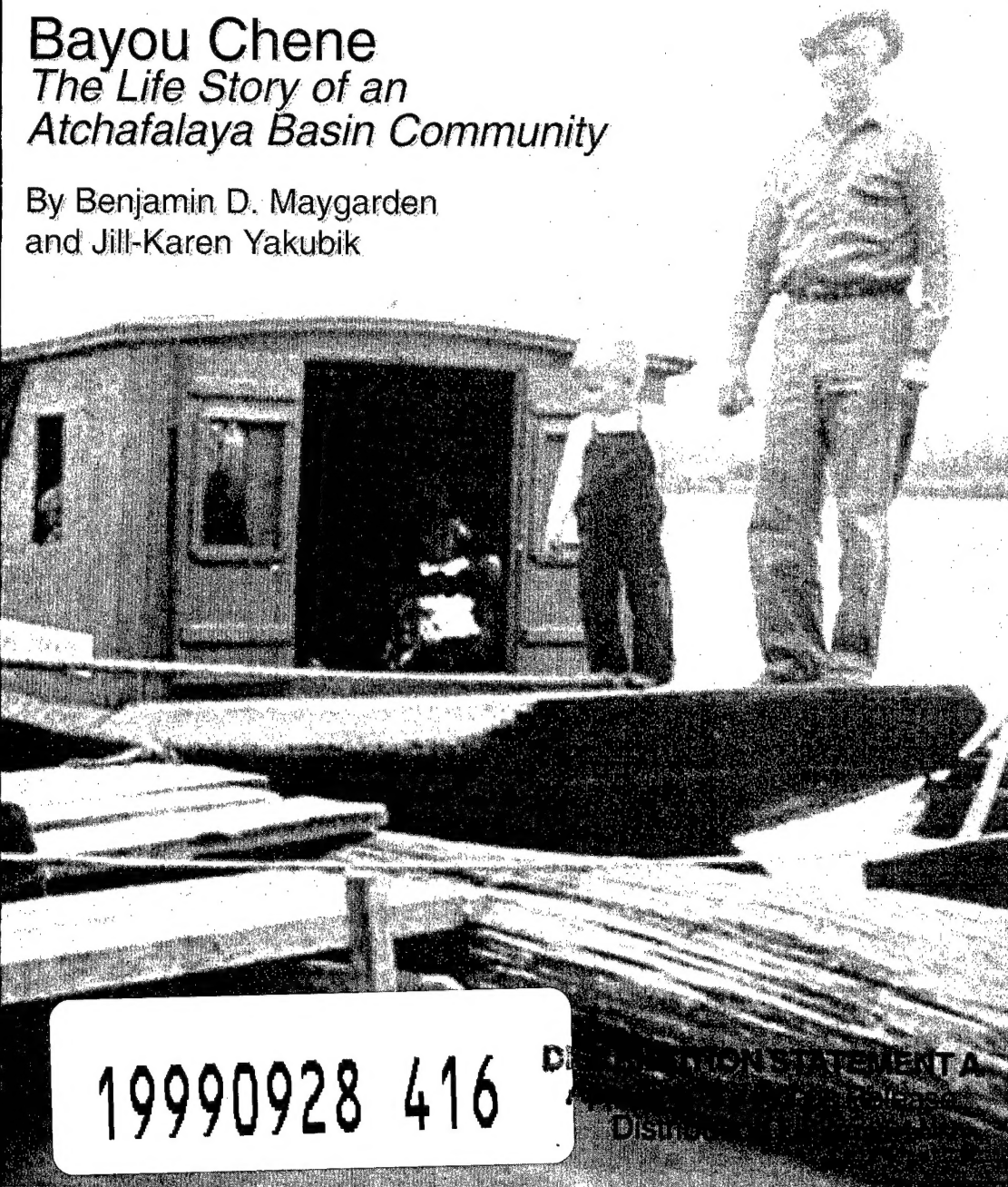


US Army Corps
of Engineers
New Orleans District

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**US Army Corps
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New Orleans District

Serving Louisiana

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' involvement in Louisiana dates back to 1803 when an Army engineer was sent to the newly acquired city of New Orleans to study its defenses. The Corps' early work in the area was of a military nature, but soon expanded to include navigation and flood control. Today, New Orleans District builds upon these long-standing responsibilities with its commitment to environmental engineering.

New Orleans District's jurisdiction covers 30,000 square miles of south central and coastal Louisiana. The district plans, designs, constructs and operates navigation, flood control, hurricane protection, and coastal restoration projects. It maintains more than 2,800 miles of navigable waterways and operates twelve navigation locks, helping to make the ports of south Louisiana number one in the nation in total tonnage (number one in grain exports). The Corps has built 950 miles of levees and floodwalls, and six major flood control structures to make it possible to live and work along the lower Mississippi River.

The Corps cares for the environment by regulating dredge and fill in all navigable waters and wetlands, and by designing projects to reduce the rate of coastal land loss. Besides constructing major Mississippi River freshwater diversion structures, the District regularly creates new wetlands and restores barrier islands with material dredged from navigation channels. The District also chairs the multi-agency Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force, which is planning and constructing a variety of projects to restore and protect the state's coastal marshes. In addition, the District manages the clean up of hazardous waste sites for the Environmental Protection Agency.

One important aspect of the New Orleans District program is its historic preservation and cultural resources management program. The Corps protects a great variety of prehistoric and historic sites to meet the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act. The New Orleans District recognizes its responsibilities to communicate the results of its numerous studies to the public, and this booklet is the second in our series of popular publications. The booklet was prepared in connection with the District's Atchafalaya Basin Floodway, an important component of the comprehensive plan for flood control in the Lower Mississippi Valley. This multi-state plan, called the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project (MR&T) provides flood protection for the alluvial valley between Cape Girardeau, Missouri and the mouth of the river.

Bayou Chene

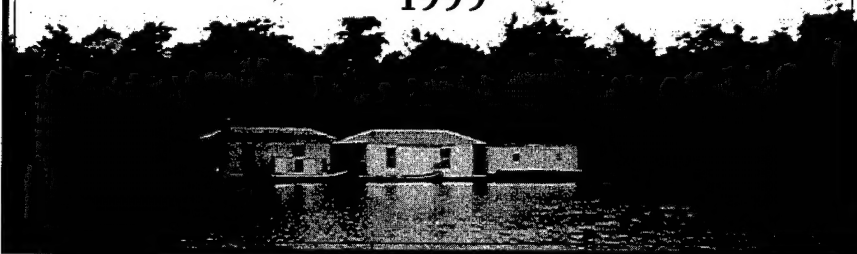
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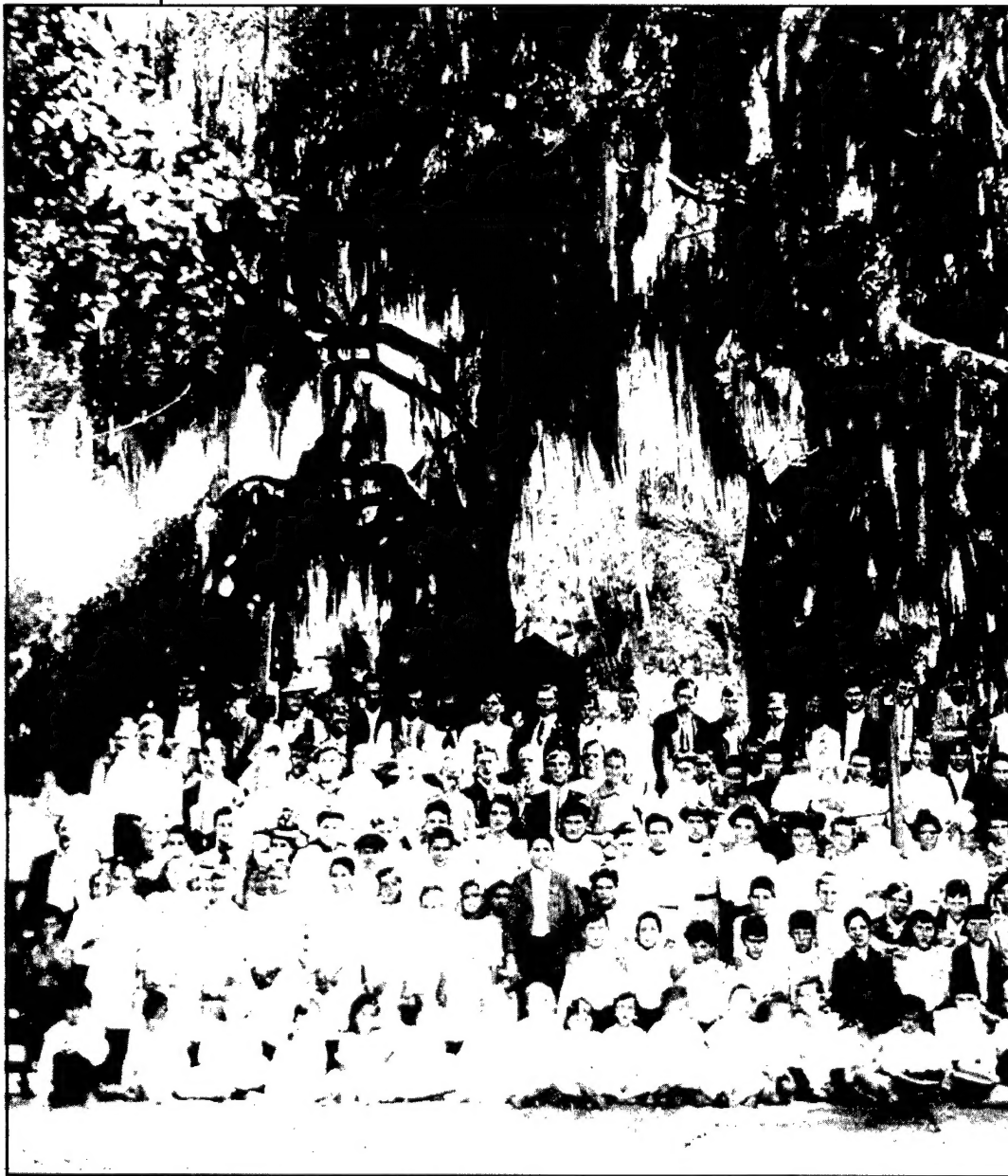


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PRESERVING LOUISIANA'S HERITAGE



Introduction

The Atchafalaya River Basin has changed a great deal in the past century and a half. Twisting bayous where steamboats traveled, loaded with barrels of sugar or towing huge rafts of timber, are now filled with sediment and grown over with trees. Other bayous, broad lakes and the Atchafalaya itself have been straightened and dredged to greater depths. Willow thickets now stand where immense live oaks and cypress once grew, robed in Spanish moss. Arrow-straight canals crisscross the landscape, ignoring natural terrain. And every year the spring floods of the Atchafalaya River leave more silt and sand behind, burying the basin's past further beneath the surface. However, some people can recall a different Atchafalaya Basin. They remember a beautiful environment that repaid hard work with rich harvests of timber, fish and game. They remember a home where their ancestors lived for more than three generations, and where they themselves grew up. They remember a small community that no longer exists, but that still draws them together, like a family, after the passage of decades. They remember a place called Bayou Chene.





Chitimacha. The two battled from 1706 until 1718. The French killed or enslaved many of the Chitimacha. Only a handful of the Chitimacha were left by the time of the Louisiana Purchase. Their descendants resided along Bayou de Plomb into the late-nineteenth century, but they moved to Bayou Teche near Charenton by 1900.

Colonial Period

We do not know when the first Frenchman traveling in the Atchafalaya Basin named *Bayou Chêne* or "Oak Bayou." Whoever it was, Native Americans had been there first. When the French arrived in Louisiana in the late-1600s, the Chitimacha tribe, numbering about 3,000 persons, lived in the area stretching from Bayou Teche to the Mississippi River. Several Chitimacha settlements were around Bayou Chene, including *Ka'me naksh tcat na'mu*, on Bayou de Plomb, *Ku'shub* (or *Ku'cux*) *na'mu* ("Cottonwood Village") on Lake Mongoulois and *Na'mu ka'tsi* ("Village of Bones") on Bayou Chene itself. The precise locations of these sites are not known.

Contact with the French was eventually a disaster for the

In the 1700s, the Louisiana colonists usually saw the Atchafalaya Basin as an obstacle to east-west travel rather than as a place to settle. Travelers noted the area's fine timber, but they preferred the better farmland elsewhere in Louisiana. By the late-eighteenth century, cattle ranchers from the Attakapas prairies drove herds of cattle across the basin to eastern markets. As they established drover's roads across the basin, people became more familiar with the area's potential for settlement. Scattered settlements were established in the basin by the 1790s, including at least one family at Lake Chicot near Bayou Chene. Frenchman C.C. Robin described a trip through the Atchafalaya Basin in 1803:

...The bayou breaks up into innumerable channels, as it flows along, in which one is easily lost if he is not familiar with them.

Sometimes, the channel enlarges into lakes, sometimes it narrows suddenly and one finds oneself in shadowy avenues, overhung with enormous trees, impenetrable by the rays of the sun, interlaced with dense vines, and loaded with grayish streamers of Spanish moss, barely leaving room for the passage of the boat. One imagines himself crossing the shadowy Styx with Acheron. Alligators in swarms surround the travelers or are seen sleeping everywhere on the shell beaches. Mixed with the deep throated bugling of giant frogs... [are] the sharp cries of black cormorants and the melancholy love note of the owls.

After long sinuosities which form innumerable islands, among which the inexperienced traveler would

These tall trees are cypresses. Stretching away from us as far as the eye can see, each cindery column, based upon a broad, deeply furrowed cone, crowned with branches which hardly bend down at all. These columns seem to form the portico, and one fancies that he is before the immense palace of the God of the Waters... the mysterious lair of Old Proteus... [Robin 1966:184-185]

Antebellum Period 1804-1861

Residents of the Atchafalaya Basin were few at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, and much of the basin interior remained unknown. However, in the late-1820s and early-1830s, a growing

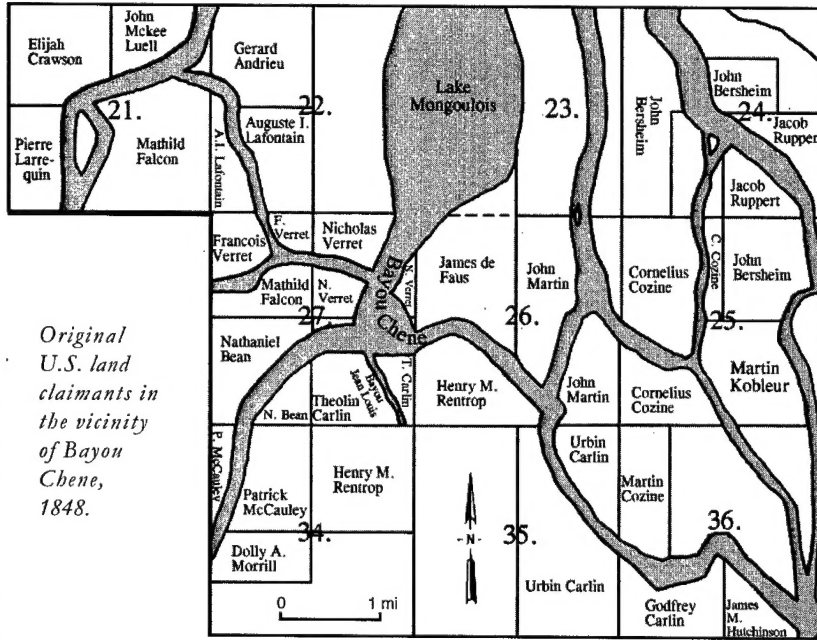
The oldest form of boat used in the Atchafalaya Basin was the dugout pirogue, adapted from Native American canoes.



require the thread of Ariadne in order not to wander forever, the river opens suddenly into a magnificent lake of several leagues extent. The sudden light surprises the traveler and the beauty of the water, set about with tall trees, forms an enchanting sight.

demand for agricultural land prompted widespread surveys of the area. Parts of Grand River had been surveyed by 1829 and were settled by the early-1830s. During the 1830s, settlements also developed on Bayou Grosse Tete and Bayou Sorrel, with plan-

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tations following soon after at Bayou Chene. By 1841, at least 16 planters were homesteading along Bayou Chene, Bayou Crook Chene and

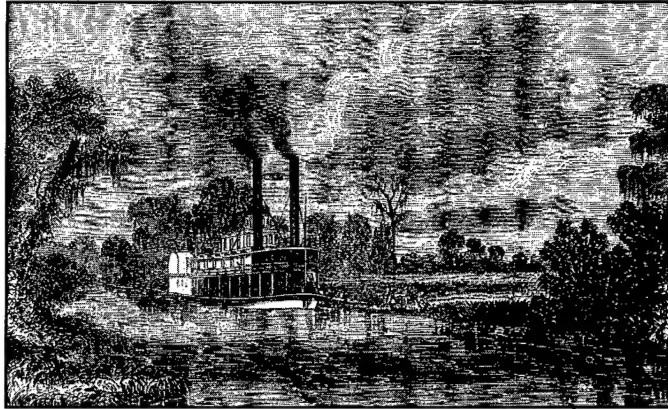
Bayou de Plomb. The first claims of land in the Bayou Chene area were registered with the U.S. government in June 1848, and nearly all the tracts in the vicinity were claimed by the end of September 1848. The descendants of many of the original Bayou Chene claimants still lived there a century later.



The 1850 census was the first to list residents at Bayou Chene; it counted 184 free persons in 41 households. Fifty-seven Bayou Chene inhabitants were Free People of Color, accounting for 30% of the free population in 1850. Many of these Free People of Color migrated out of the area during the 1850s. Twelve slave owners in the area held a total of 93 slaves, who also constituted

Pirogues were traditionally carved from a single cypress tree. Pirogues began to be built of planks by 1920, but cypress dugouts continued in use because they outlasted plank-built boats.

about 30% of the population. The total Bayou Chene area population was about 277 persons. A post office was established at Bayou Chene in 1858, indicating that the population was large and stable enough for official recognition.



By the 1860 census, the total Bayou Chene population increased to about 675 persons. Two-hundred and ninety-four free persons were listed as resident at Bayou Chene or on nearby bayous. Free People of Color made up less than 10% of the total number of free persons by this time. The 1860 records also indicate that Native Americans composed 5% of the total population in 1860. These Na-

tive Americans were probably in the area in 1850, but were missed by the earlier census. There were about 375 plantation slaves in 1860, outnumbering the free inhabitants. Several original residents still resided in the area, notably members of the Carline, Falcon, Lafontaine and Verret families. The Allen, Mendoza and Seneca families came into the area by this time and remained into the twentieth century.

Steamboats transported sugar from the Atchafalaya Basin to market during the antebellum period. Many of the basin waterways they used have vanished, filled with sediment.



Bayou Chene planters raised smaller amounts of sugarcane than the great planters along the Mississippi River, Bayou Lafourche and Bayou Teche. Most basin planters still had horse-powered cane mills when the Civil War began, but a few had steam-powered cane mills. All Bayou Chene sugar houses used old-fashioned open kettles to boil the sugar instead of the more advanced vacuum pans. Some other inhabitants were subsistence farmers who also hunted, fished, collected Spanish moss

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and cut timber. Before 1860, floods ruined some crop years in the basin, most notably in 1851. Floods became worse after the Atchafalaya was cleared of log-jams in 1861, making life more difficult in the basin.

The Civil War In The Atchafalaya Basin

Basin waterways were considered a route between the Union forces on the lower Atchafalaya River and Union forces in the Baton Rouge area. In turn, Bayou Chene became the main route from Grand River to Grand Lake, drawing attention to the area. Before attacking Confederate Fort Burton at Butte-à-la-Rose (Butte La Rose), Union troops raided the basin, confiscating sugar, molasses,

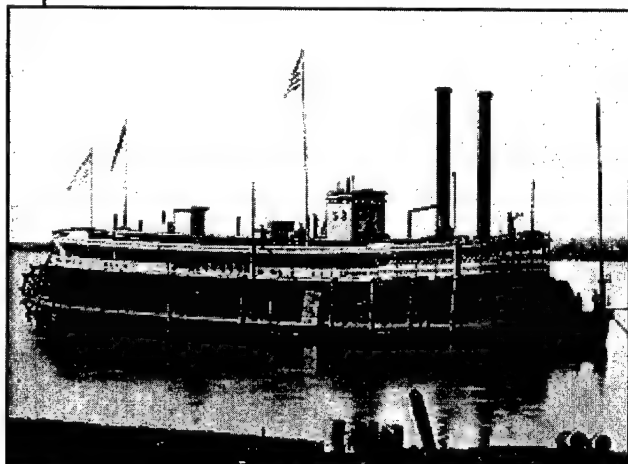
and cut timber. Before 1860, floods ruined some crop years in the basin, most notably in 1851. Floods became worse after the Atchafalaya was cleared of log-jams in 1861, making life more difficult in the basin.

Union forces defeated the Confederates at Bisland, Grand Lake and Fort Burton in the spring of 1863, giving them control of the Atchafalaya waterways wherever they could operate gunboats. The Confederates could not match the firepower of these vessels. Even with this advantage, though, Confederate guerrilla forces, as well as jayhawkers and smugglers, constantly harassed the federals, especially in the summer of 1864. Jayhawkers were bands of deserters, draft dodgers and criminals who infested much of Louisiana during the last three years of the war. Confederate irregular forces used the familiar terrain of the basin to their advantage,

relying upon pirogues, skiffs and horses in their hit-and-run forays against the federals.

To deal with these problems, the Union command decided to destroy all ferries, bridges and boats in the basin as well as confiscate all contraband goods. Anything not produced locally, including flour, salt and other staples, became unavailable to

U.S. Gunboat #53 was typical of the shallow-draft, lightly armored "tinclads" that brought the Civil War to Bayou Chene and other Atchafalaya Basin waterways.

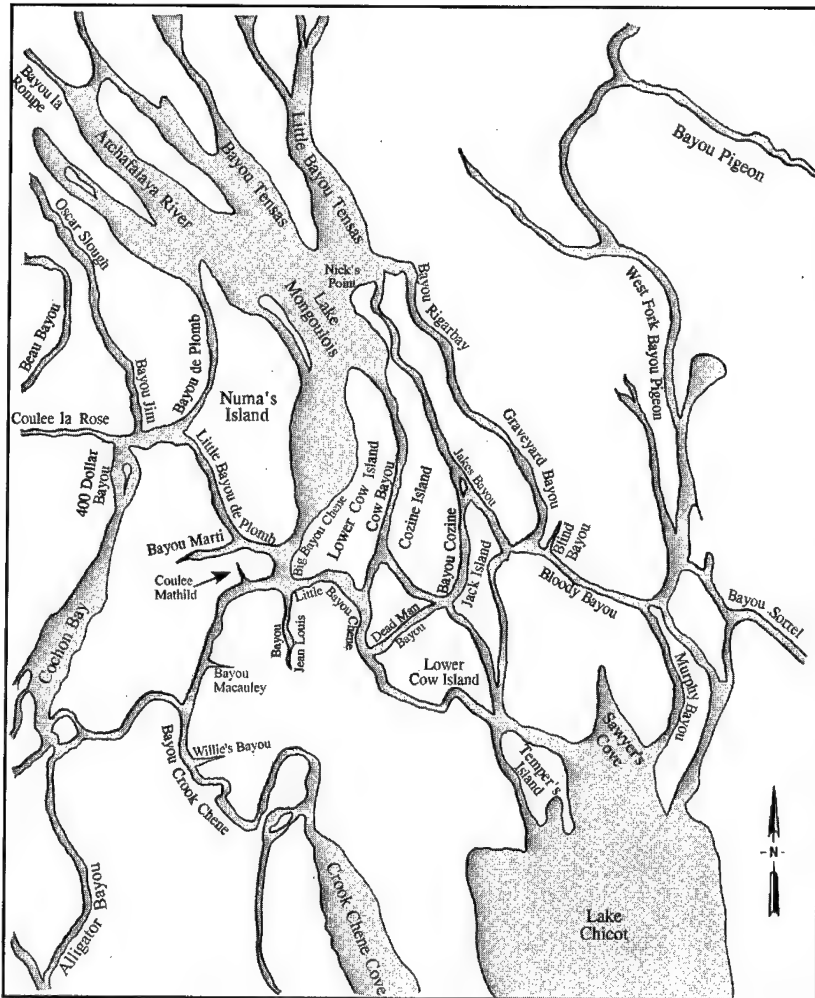


ses, cotton and firearms from basin residents. These forays by federal troops became increas-

ingly frequent and made life more difficult for Bayou Chene residents.

Bayou Chene

Waterways and landforms in the Bayou Chene vicinity before channel alterations in the twentieth century.



residents. These policies antagonized local Union sympathizers and hindered the collection of intelligence. In November 1864, the Union command conceded that "small loyal planters" in the basin could keep their boats if they were hidden at night from "guerrilla thieves." However, the federals still withheld supplies from inhabitants who did not inform on the guerrillas. Ba-

sin residents, including families at Bayou Chene, also suffered from jayhawker activity into 1865.

Much damage at Bayou Chene was the direct result of military action. Many boats, sugarhouses and stores of sugar were destroyed by Union gunboats and troops. By February 1865, the levee on Grand River

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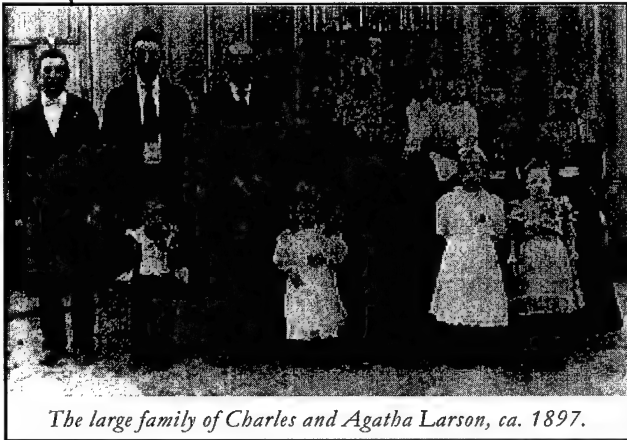
was broken in many places, and the entire region below Bayou Plaquemine was impassable because of flooding. This caused a number of Union sympathizers at Bayou Chene to leave the basin on federal gunboats. Large numbers of livestock could not be saved and were left to drown. The end of the Civil War in Louisiana found Bayou Chene flooded and abandoned. The post office at Bayou Chene had stayed open through the war but was officially closed on June 22, 1866. It would not reopen for ten years.

between 1862 and 1873. Finally, a severe flood in 1874 ended commercial agriculture in the region. Some former residents can still remember seeing plantation cane field features in the Bayou Chene area when they were young. Today, these have all been obscured by sedimentation and tree growth.

New settlers also moved into the Bayou Chene area after the Civil War, including at least one Union veteran. By 1870, the Bayou Chene population totaled 277 persons, roughly the same as

the free population in 1850. By 1876, the population had grown to approximately 450 persons despite the 1874 flood. A dramatic change was the departure of most African-Americans, the majority of whom moved during the war and Reconstruction. By 1900, not a single African-American resided at Bayou Chene.

The number of French or Acadian families also declined during the late-nineteenth century. Among those that remained were the Theriot, Landry, Daigle, Verret and Broussard families. Even a few European immigrants and first-generation Americans moved to Bayou Chene, but most new settlers were Anglo-Americans from southern and northern



The large family of Charles and Agatha Larson, ca. 1897.

Bayou Chene from the Civil War to 1907

Some antebellum residents returned to Bayou Chene after the 1865 flood. For the most part, planters did not share the post-war recovery enjoyed by the sugar growers on the Mississippi River. Only W.W. and E.T. King produced any sugar

states. Family histories relate how "people from all over ended up in Bayou Chene." Bayou Chene offered these post-Civil War migrants cheap land (for as little as \$.25 per acre) where they could make a living cutting timber, hunting, fishing or raising livestock.

Bayou Chene retained its frontier character in this period. Education levels were generally low, although Oswald Templet established a school in the late-nineteenth century, holding class in any available building. In the frontier tradition, a person's past was behind them at Bayou Chene. Former residents indicate that if newcomers "behaved themselves," they were accepted

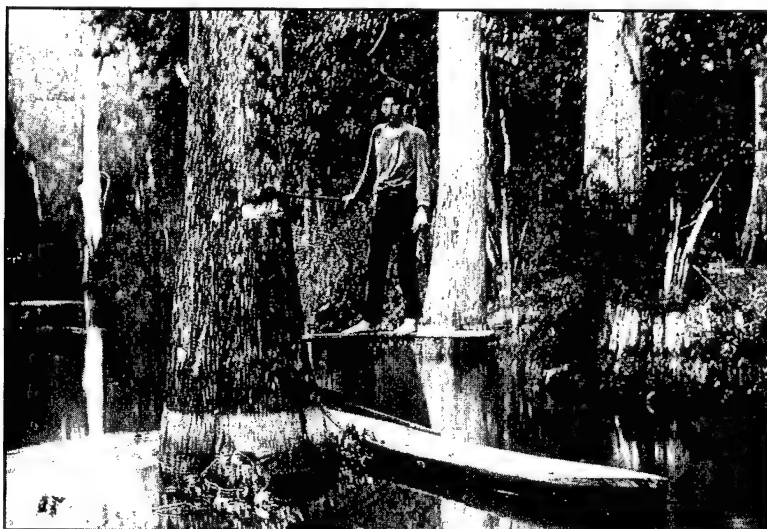
as members of the community, but no one tolerated "foolishness." Residents sometimes substituted personal action for distant legal authority. The St. Martin Parish sheriff usually visited Bayou Chene at election time, though rarely otherwise.

The lumberjacks and others at Bayou Chene could be a rough crowd. One newcomer to Bayou Chene, Robert Wisdom, was reputedly challenged to prove that he was tough enough



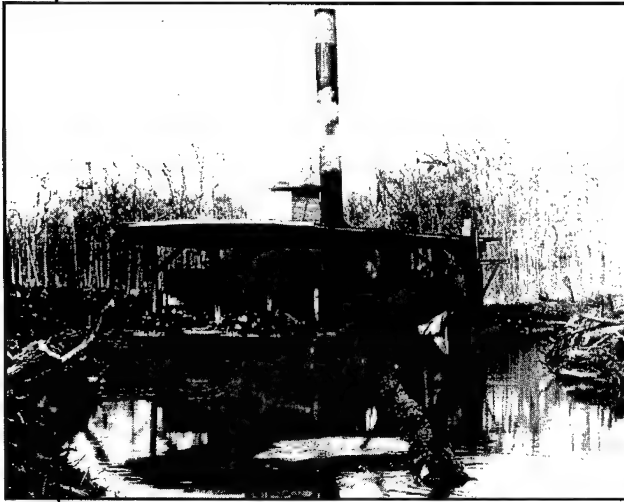
Bayou Chene

An Atchafalaya Basin swamper floating out a log, ca. 1888.



An Atchafalaya Basin swamper on a "chopping board" preparing to cut down a cypress tree, ca. 1888.

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A pull-boat in a Louisiana cypress swamp, ca. 1900.

to stay. A small crowd had gathered at Cyrus Case's store to meet the steamboat on which Wisdom happened to arrive. Some locals told Wisdom that he had to fight them or he could not stay in the community. Wisdom "rolled his sleeves up" and met the challenge.

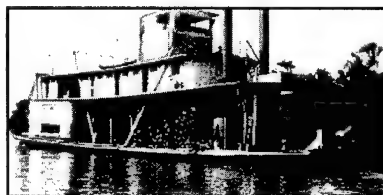
Luckily, the construction of railroads across the region allowed the basin's products to reach distant markets, resuscitating economic development in the region. The most important of these basin products in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was cypress lumber, which fed into a burgeoning national market for building materials. By the 1870s, most male residents of Bayou Chene were involved with logging, while a few planted and farmed.

"Float" logging was the early method used to cut timber in the

basin. Trees were cut down with axes and saws, and the logs floated out of the swamp during periods of high water. Float logging had little impact on the vast stands of cypress in the Atchafalaya region because of the difficult process of removing the logs from swamps.

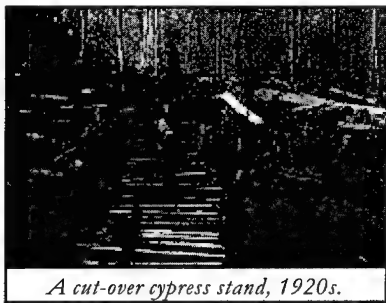
However, the in-

vention of the pullboat in 1889 and the overhead cableway railway skidder in 1892 brought on full-scale industrial exploitation of swamp cypress. Louisiana sawmills produced 248 million board feet of cypress lumber in 1899, and one *billion* board feet in 1915. The largest logging company in the Bayou Chene area was the Schwing Lumber Company of Plaquemine. The steamboat *Carrie B. Schwing* was a frequent sight at Bayou Chene, towing large rafts or "booms" of logs to Plaquemine to be milled. Cypress was rapidly depleted after 1915 and production declined. Large-scale logging was virtually over by 1925, little more than a single generation af-



The Carrie B. Schwing was a familiar site on Bayou Chene booming timber to Plaquemines.

ter it began. Industrial logging was a brief but intense ecological and cultural phenomenon in South Louisiana. It greatly affected both the ecosystem of the Atchafalaya Basin and its human residents. Removing stands of virgin cypress trees rapidly transformed the landscape. Pullboat "roads" pierced natural levees to



A cut-over cypress stand, 1920s.

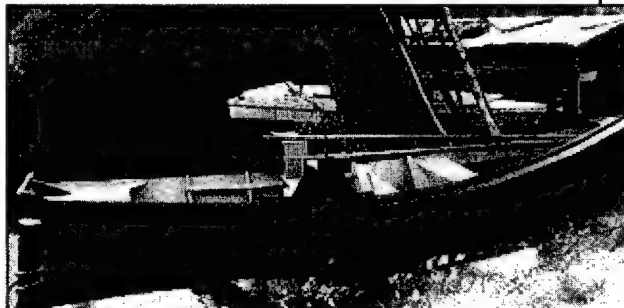
maintain water levels, altering drainage in the region. Many pullboat roads, logging canals and tramways were still visible in the basin a quarter of a century ago, but many have vanished because of sedimentation.

Trapping, fishing and moss picking remained important to year-round residents of the Atchafalaya Basin during the boom in the cypress logging industry. Fishing became the most important of these other activities to the Bayou Chene community. The development of ice-making machines and the tow-car allowed live fish to be trans-

ported to the rail terminal in Morgan City, making commercial fishing in the basin viable. By 1894, state records listed 756 "general fishermen" in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Life at Bayou Chene ca. 1907-1927

The golden age of Bayou Chene may have been the period from the introduction of the internal combustion boat motor before 1907 to the disastrous 1927 flood. Cypress lumbering still flourished in the region, and the inboard boat motor made commercial fishing more profitable. Only one major flood in 1912 and two lesser high-water years, 1913 and 1922, damaged homes, livestock and fields in the basin. After every major flood some families left Bayou Chene, but a few new ones would move into the area, and a substantial core of families remained resident through the vagaries of floods and other events. The population of Bayou Chene in 1927 was about 500 persons.



Bayou Chene

The skiff was one of the major forms of transportation in the basin before the introduction of boat motors. Outrigger-like jous allowed the rower to stand and face forward in the "push-skiff;" a "pull-skiff" was rowed while seated facing backward.

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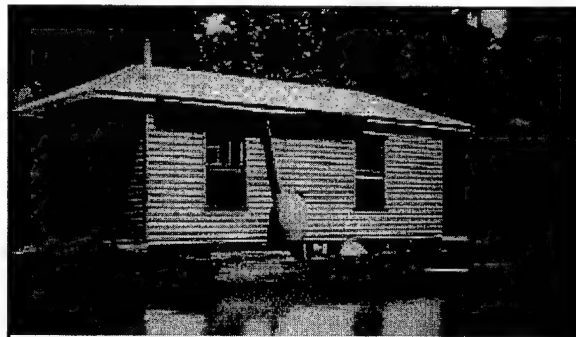
The Cyrus Case house and store, 1920s. The Cyrus Case store was located near the geographical center of the Bayou Chene community and was long a popular meeting point.



Many Bayou Chene residents farmed or raised livestock in this period. By the early-twentieth century, no one grew any quantity of sugarcane at Bayou Chene, but several farms developed on the extensive tracts cleared in the nineteenth century for cane-growing. Residents grew corn, potatoes, beans, cabbage and fruit trees, and raised milk cattle and oxen, hogs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese and guinea hens. Hogs and cattle ranged freely, marked with ear-notches. In frontier style, people built fences not to keep livestock penned in but to keep them out of yards and gardens.

Some of the homes at Bayou Chene, such as those of John Snellgrove, Albert Stockstill, John Crowson, Gertrude Tenpenny and Cyrus Case, were large frame

structures built in late-nineteenth or turn-of-the-century style. Most houses were more modest. Numerous families lived in two-room houses, and some lived in one-room houses. Architecture varied widely. Acadian-style houses and shotguns raised on wood blocks were common. Some families resided on houseboats, those of fishermen in particular. Drinking water was collected in cypress cisterns. Only a few families had brick fireplaces and chimneys; some had traditional stick and mud chimneys. Most families cooked on iron stoves. The favored heating and



An Atchafalaya Basin houseboat, 1920s.

cooking wood was ash, which had a low market value and could be cut freely anywhere.

Among the important developments in the Bayou Chene lifestyle was the introduction by 1907 of the gasoline-fueled internal combustion engine for powering boats. Prior to the introduction of these engines, the average resident of the Atchafalaya Basin owned only a pirogue or a push-skiff. The small early single-cylinder, two-horsepower engines greatly increased the range of fishermen or indepen-



Bayou Chene

dent loggers. Larger engines were soon developed. The inboard engines were installed in what French-speakers called a *bateau* and English-speakers

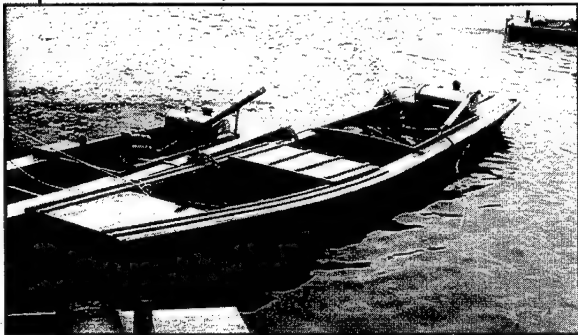
An Atchafalaya Basin putt-putt.

Small, two-cycle gasoline engines revolutionized life in the basin by making transportation much faster and easier for the average basin resident.

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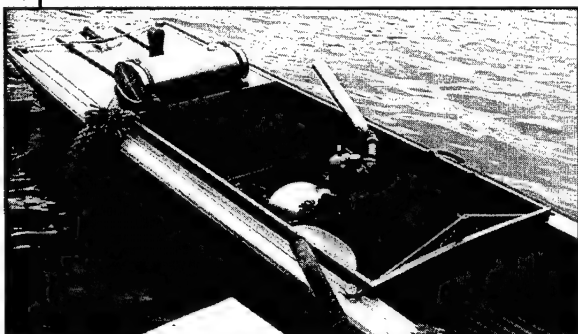


called a "joe boat." The bateau was up to about 25 feet long, heavy, flat-bottomed, and had a blunt bow and stern. Fitted with the small Lockwood-Ash, Kelly or Nadler engine, these boats were also called "putt-putts."

The adoption of putt-putts corresponded with strong consumer demand for freshwater

also sold grocery staples, coal oil and tar, kerosene and gasoline to the basin residents. The fish were brought to a dock by the fish-boats and then shipped by rail to urban markets.

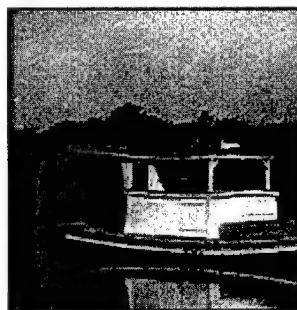
Bayou Chene fishermen used a wide variety of fishing techniques. They typically fished for catfish with baited lines, using shad, river shrimp or crawfish for bait. Buffalofish were usually caught in unbaited hoop nets. Fishing lines and nets were made of cotton, and had to be dipped in vats of hot coal tar about every two weeks to keep them from rotting quickly.



fish. "Fish-boats" from the rail-heads came to the community several times a week, collecting mostly catfish (blue and yellow), buffalofish and gaspergou from local fishermen. They also purchased turtles, alligator skins, furs, and honey. The fishermen kept their daily catch in live-boxes of cypress, which were kept submerged. The fish-boats

was quickly depleted near ground level, and harvesters had to use a long hooked pole from a moss barge, a raised wooden platform on a flatboat. The moss

Spanish moss-picking reached its peak during the 1920s when moss was in high demand for upholstery stuffing. Some moss could be collected as "black moss" that had fallen to the ground and dried out, but it was usually picked green. The moss



An Atchafalaya Basin fish-boat. were often luggers; in later years

The "putt-putt" was made by installing a two-cycle motor in a bateau or "joe boat."



was laid on the ground to cure in large piles. The piles were watered and turned with a pitchfork so that the moss would not catch fire. Eventually, the moss was spread out on a fence, wire or tree branches to finish drying. The outer covering of the moss decomposed, leaving the horsehair-like core. After about six weeks of curing, the moss weighed 2/3 less than it did when picked. The dried moss brought the picker only about one cent per pound. The fish-boats

purchased the cured and baled moss from basin residents, taking it to a moss gin. Moss was harvested at Bayou Chene in large amounts until the late-1920s, and in smaller quantities for a longer period.

Reminiscent of its early days, Bayou Chene continued to be a rowdy place. Several saloons

operated at various times, most of them simple barrooms attached to grocery stores. After Prohibition, some residents brewed their own beer, while Patin's store in Butte La Rose supplied illicit liquor in the basin. Fiddlers and accordionists from St. Martinville, Catahoula, Butte La Rose and elsewhere provided music for dances until the beginning of the 1930s. Even though a minority of the Bayou Chene population were Acadian or French, the community retained some Acadian cultural influence. The most popular dances at Bayou Chene were



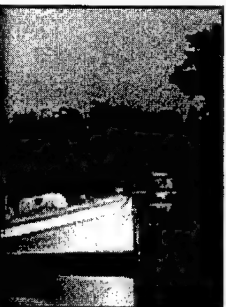
"round dances" or roundelays, mazurkas and waltzes; all shared in Cajun tradition. The presence of the saloons may have contributed to the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of Bayou Chene in this period, but drunkenness and fighting were probably no more common here than anywhere else in rural south Louisiana at the time.

The shooting of Joe Carpenter by Nick Burns around 1919

Bayou Chene

Before the introduction of nylon in the 1950s, cotton nets and fishing line had to be tarred about every two weeks.

An Atchafalaya River fisherman hauls a large hoopnet into his joe boat, 1940s.



1920s and 1930s, the fish-boats bateaux were often used.

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*Rafting out
hardwood
lumber, 1920s.*



has entered community folklore as an unusual, late example of violence at Bayou Chene. Carpenter came to Bayou Chene as an older man and was deemed "half crazy." Once a visitor spat on the floor of Carpenter's house, and Carpenter shot a hole in the floor next to the visitor's chair. He then ordered the visitor to spit through the hole next time. Carpenter disliked the family of Nick Burns, who lived across Bayou Chene, and

suspected they were stealing from his house. One day Carpenter dusted the floor with flour before leaving. Upon returning home, Carpenter found several footprints, and interpreted them as the footprints of Burns' sons. Carpenter proclaimed that he would kill Burns' family from the little baby up to the father, from "blond to bald." He asked two fish-boat operators to bring him rifle cartridges from town, but

each gave Carpenter excuses why they could not obtain the shells. Finally, Carpenter entered a pirogue with a shotgun and began paddling toward Burns' residence. Mrs. Burns saw Carpenter first and said she would kill him if her husband would not.

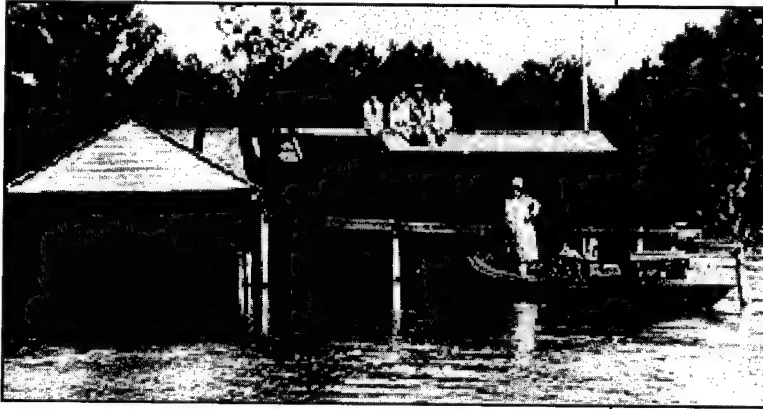
*Fashionable
students pose
at the Bayou
Chene School
cistern, 1926.*



Nick Burns grabbed his deer rifle and warned Carpenter to turn back. Carpenter answered with further threats and obscenities. Burns, a crack shot, fired and hit Carpenter in the chest. Despite his wound, Carpenter continued to paddle toward Burns. Burns fired a second shot, hitting Carpenter in the head and killing him instantly. John Snellgrove, Carpenter's employer, interceded with the St. Martin Parish sheriff on Burns' behalf, and no criminal action

was taken in the case. Coincidentally, Carpenter was buried next to one of the pastors of the Bayou Chene Methodist Church. This caused a resident to comment that Bayou Chene is "the only place in the world where a preacher and a criminal could be buried side by side" (quoted in Case 1973:130-131).

through the sixth grade. The in-board boat engine enabled more children from a wider area to attend the Bayou Chene school, and no later than 1912, motorized school boats or "boat transfers" were in use. They were a pleasant ride in fine weather, but could be bitterly cold in the winter. In later years, a traditional prank was for a line of children in the boat to hold hands while one on the end touched the engine's spark plug. The children along the line got shocked.



The Decline of Bayou Chene, 1927 to 1953

The rough character of Bayou Chene was tamed somewhat during later decades. The population became more settled, more connected with the outside world, and better educated. The St. Martin Parish Public School at Bayou Chene was built in the early-twentieth century, replacing the old one-teacher school. In early decades, the school went

through the sixth grade. The in-board boat engine enabled more children from a wider area to attend the Bayou Chene school, and no later than 1912, motorized school boats or "boat transfers" were in use. They were a pleasant ride in fine weather, but could be bitterly cold in the winter. In later years, a traditional prank was for a line of children in the boat to hold hands while one on the end touched the engine's spark plug. The children along the line got shocked.

The great flood of 1927 marks the period of decline of Bayou Chene. Most residents evacuated the area during the 1927 flood. Myrtle Burns Bigler recalled 1927 flood waters reaching seven feet above the bank of the Atchafalaya River. Some Bayou Chene residents remained in the area living on houseboats during the flood, but most resi-

Devastating floods in 1927, 1937 and 1947, plus high water in other years, ultimately persuaded many residents to leave the Atchafalaya Basin.

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An Atchafalaya Basin resident picking moss from a skiff, ca. 1948.

dents' homes were on the flooded banks. A few residents put their livestock on hastily-assembled log rafts during the high water and kept them there as long as they could, or until the water subsided. Other residents returned to find four feet of water in their homes, and built scaffolds or plank walks inside their houses. Bayou Chene folklore tells of Warren Stockstill's goat stranded in the Methodist Church during the 1927 flood. The goat survived weeks of high water by eating the hymnals and wallpaper in the church. Many residents returned to Bayou Chene after the great flood, but others left the area to settle outside of the basin.



The Great Depression years of the 1930s were hard on Bayou Chene residents. Increased flooding in the Atchafalaya Basin made it more and more difficult to pursue any agriculture or raise livestock. Logging declined and hunting, fishing, trapping and moss-pick-



Fur trapping helped many Atchafalaya Basin residents make a living.

ing assumed new importance. For most of the life of the Bayou Chene community, no restrictions had been recognized on hunting season, location or game limit. On the other hand, fishing grounds were considered proprietary and were respected by other fishermen. By 1933, there were 1,073 full-time fishermen

in the basin who received more than 50% of their income from fishing, frogging and crabbing, and about twice as many part-time fishermen. The rise of truck transportation about 1940 meant that fish-boats took the Bayou Chene catch to a larger number of docks at the edge of the basin.

Former Bayou Chene residents agree that fish and shellfish were never a major part of the typical diet in the community, despite commercial fishing by many residents. Apparently fishing and crabbing were primarily for outside markets, as was the case also with hunting alligators and frogs. The only two species of fish eaten with any regularity were catfish (usually fried) and gaspergou. Alligators were hunted or caught on a line for their skins, since the meat was rarely or never eaten by Bayou Cheners. Crawfish were eaten rarely, only on Good Friday by many Bayou Chene Catholics. More important than fish or shellfish in the diet were beef, pork, poultry, game and beans. In traditional fashion, hogs were typically killed in the cool weather months and the meat ground and salted for preservation.

Raccoon, otter and mink furs were other basin products bought by the fish-boats. After the early-1930s, higher water levels reduced the population of

some game in what had been a teeming habitat. Before the live oaks of the Bayou Chene vicinity succumbed to sedimentation, squirrels were particularly plentiful in the area. Bayou Chene folklore says that a man could put a pot on to boil, leave the house with his gun, and return with a potfull of squirrels before the water was boiling.



Cypress logging and moss picking declined during the Great Depression. The last large virgin cypress stand in the central basin was Buffalo Cove, south of Bayou Chene. Buffalo Cove was logged in the early-1930s by John Snellgrove and several other Bayou Chene residents. Moss-picking remained a sideline for many Bayou Chene residents in the 1930s and 1940s, but finally died out when foam rubber replaced moss for upholstery use.

Former Bayou Chene residents recall the excitement created by federal works projects in the Depression, a time when

Despite the importance of commercial fishing to the community, livestock were a more important food source for Bayou Chene residents.

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people were hard-pressed for employment. Numerous residents of the community worked on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers levee and dredging projects in the basin that began in the



U.S. dredge Zeta being pushed by U.S. steamer Chisca in Whiskey Bay during the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Atchafalaya River Channel Rectification project, January, 1933.

early-1930s. Some of these projects paid \$3.20 per day — a dollar a day more than cutting timber. The Works Progress Administration also enlarged the Bayou Chene schoolhouse and constructed a levee around the schoolyard.

Despite flooding and the economic hardship of the Depression, living standards eventually improved for many Bayou Chene residents. Tin roofing replaced wooden shingles. By the late-1940s, stores and some homes had gasoline-powered electric generators for lights, and coal oil- or kerosene-powered refrigerators. Radio also came to the Bayou, lessening the isolation of the community. Some residents served in World War II, also widening their horizons.

Former residents recount the reliability, honesty and civic-mindedness of the Bayou

Cheners. They contrast Bayou Chene with other parts of the basin in the past, and particularly with current society. The occasional livestock or timber theft in the early decades of the century were rare in the 1930s and 1940s. Houses and sheds were never locked, and permission was unnecessary to borrow tools or equipment. People generally respected ownership of fishing grounds and rarely disturbed nets or lines. These conditions have vanished in recent decades, and property crime plagues the basin today.

Former residents speak highly of the education they received at the Bayou Chene school in this period. During the late-1930s, approximately 100 students attended through the seventh grade; this total decreased to 72 children in 1944, mirroring the declining community population. The school was moved to a new building on the north side of the Bayou Chene Cut about 1945, and closed by 1953. At St. Martin Parish school rallies, the Bayou Chene team often won academic hon-



ors. The Bayou Chene school taught at a relatively high level because the first year of schooling in St. Martin Parish was "primer," in which Acadian French-speaking children were taught English. This was not necessary at Bayou Chene, since most families spoke English or were bilingual. Riding in the school boat is a vivid memory for former Bayou Chene residents. School boat drivers of this period, including Edwin Curry, Leander Curry, Louis Snellgrove, Earl Stockstill and Kervin Chauvin gave many Bayou Chene youngsters the nicknames they carried for life. Nicknames were so universally used at Bayou Chene that the real first names of people were sometimes not known by others in the community.

The Bayou Chene community had a growing diversity of religious faith in the 1930s and



Bayou Chene

The Catholic Chapel of St. Joseph was constructed on Bayou Crook Chene right before the 1927 flood.

1940s. A Catholic mission chapel had been present at Bayou Chene in the early-twentieth century but closed, perhaps at the time of the 1912 flood. A new chapel was built around 1927 on a plot donated by the Landry family on Bayou Crook Chene. The Reverend Monseignor R.J. Gobeil served as pastor of the mission church at Bayou Chene from 1938 to 1948. A Methodist church had been established at Bayou Chene by the 1880s. After the closure of the first Catholic chapel at Bayou Chene, the Methodist Church remained active at Bayou Chene. As a result, a few Bayou Chene Catholics converted to Methodism during the late-1910s and 1920s. Pastors of the Bayou Chene Methodist Church included Brother Pines, Brother Newton and Delos Cassels. The Methodist Church was moved from Little Bayou Chene to east of Big Bayou Chene about 1946. The original church bell from the Bayou Chene Methodist Church is now located in the Methodist Church of Bayou Sorrel.



The Bayou Chene School photographed during the 1927 flood. The school averaged around 100 students during the 1930s.

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Bayou Chene Methodist Church, during the 1927 high water. Originally located south of Little Bayou Chene, the church was adjacent to a large cemetery.

Two other Protestant sects were newly established in Bayou Chene in this period, the Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists. The Baptists visited Bayou Chene with a chapel boat for several years and constructed a small church east of Big Bayou Chene. During this period, the Seventh Day Adventists also constructed a church on Bayou Crook Chene, below Bayou de Plomb.

By the late-1930s, a few Bayou Chene residents made homebrew for their own consumption, but the bootleg liquor trade seems to have declined. House parties largely replaced the saloons and dances that had been held with Acadian musicians. Late in Bayou Chene's existence as a community, young people would sometimes even go to Bayou Sorrel or Charenton Beach for socializing.

Bayou Chene children costumed for a play at the St. Martin Parish schools rally, 1930s.

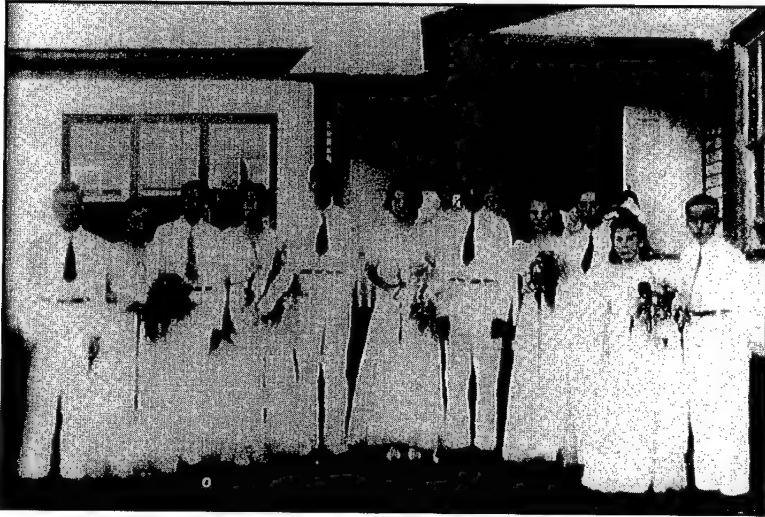


The social evolution of the Bayou Chene community was reflected in the demise of the saloons and dances of an earlier era. There were still a couple of bars, including one on a boat, at Bayou Chene in the early-1930s.

Baseball was long popular at Bayou Chene, and community teams would host games or travel to play Plaquemine, Loreauville and other regional teams. Bayou Chene produced several gifted athletes, and the

Bayou Chene

*The 1941
graduating
class of the
Bayou Chene
School.*



baseball team was highly competitive. Other pastimes were occasionally available, such as silent movies (shown in a tent) and the Harry Williams air show from Patterson, which appeared at Bayou Chene in the 1930s.

Virtually all remaining residents left Bayou Chene soon after. Former Bayou Chene residents clustered in New Iberia and St. Martinville to the west of the basin and Bayou Sorrel and Plaquemine to the east, as well as several other communities.

After the 1937 flood, several Bayou Chene residents moved their homes to the high spoil banks created by the dredging of the Bayou Chene and Bayou Tarleton cuts. The first of these residents on the spoil bank east of Big Bayou Chene was Ernest Verret, nicknamed "Canoe," and the area took the name of "Canoeville." The U.S. Post Office at Bayou Chene moved to the spoil bank adjacent to the Tarleton Cut after 1937, and then to Canoeville about 1945. On December 24, 1952, the Bayou Chene community symbolically came to an end with the closing of the U.S. Post Office.

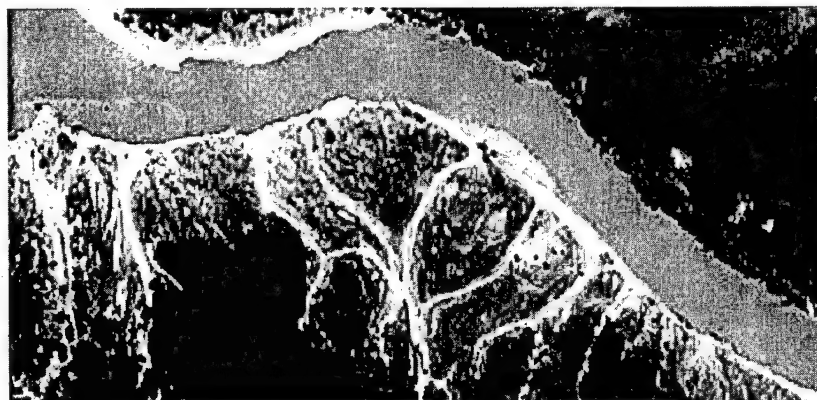


*The Curry
home on
Bayou de
Plomb, 1930s.*

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Aerial photographs taken in 1935 and 1947 show the devastating effects of flooding and sedimentation on buildings, fences and fields at Bayou Chene.



The End of Bayou Chene: Disappearance and Remembrance

Decades of annual flooding have blanketed the Atchafalaya Basin with an average of more than 12 feet of deposited silt. The landscape of Bayou Chene is unrecognizable even to former residents, unless they have closely observed the transformation over the years. The magnificent live oaks that gave Bayou Chene its name are rotting stumps, their dead boughs

projecting from ground level. Houses, graveyards and other features of Bayou Chene lie silent beneath the shroud of sediment. Fishermen and hunters speed down the bayou with powerful outboard motors, oblivious to the buried history of a once-thriving community.

Former residents of Bayou Chene are nostalgic for the by-

gone beauty of Bayou Chene and appreciate the self-reliance of its tightly-knit community. Some former residents suggest that the passing of Bayou Chene was the loss of a tradition, even a privilege, of personal autonomy and freedom in a demanding but bountiful environment. They suggest that this was an American heritage that Bayou Chene was among the last communities to enjoy. However, the passage of time and an acceptance of providence has generally tempered any bitterness over the basin's environmental deterioration and the disappearance of Bayou Chene. Former Bayou

Chene residents and their families have met recent efforts by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to document the history and physical remains of the Bayou Chene community with strong interest, enthusiasm and cooperation. The profound family and community feeling of former Bayou Chene residents is evident most dramatically at the annual Bayou Chene reunions that have been held since 1971. Bayou Chene has been gone for half a century, but in a sense the community still lives; proud of its past, and grateful for the legacy it can give its descendants.



The Bayou Chene Post Office had several locations between its opening in 1858 and closing in 1952. Postmaster Lynn Curry (center) poses with visitors from the U.S. Postal Service, ca. 1951.

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Former Bayou Chene residents accompany a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers site visit to the Bayou Chene cemeteries, July 1997.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The memories of former Bayou Chene community residents were vital to the writing of this booklet. Ben Maygarden spoke with the following oral informants (in alphabetical order): David Allen Sr., Electa Guillot Allen, Michael Allen, Philip Allen, Walter Allen, Darl Ashley, Carl Carline, Joyce Kelly Carline, Ray Carline, Stella Larson Case, Amos Curry, Lila Larson Curry, Lynn Curry, Pearl Theriot Curry, Curtis Larson, Sarah Larson, Leota Buck Megas, Douglas Mendoza, Charles Roe, Rene Seneca, Harold Snellgrove, Stanley Stockstill, Wesley Stockstill, Charles Verret and Horace Wisdom. Mr. Maygarden would like to express his sincere appreciation for having been invited into their homes to hear about Bayou Chene, and asks their forbearance for his telling of the Bayou Chene story.

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PHOTO CREDITS

Front cover: Mr. Edwin Curry's Bayou Chene school "boat transfer" carried community children to school. Mr. Curry stands with grandson Ronnie Curry, son of Amos and Pearl Curry. Pearl Curry and her daughter Lana are inside the cabin. Courtesy of Mr. Amos Curry and Mrs. Pearl Theriot Curry.

Title page: Atchafalaya Basin houseboats, 1920s. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Pages 2 and 3: Identifications by Mrs. Flavia Carline Ashley. Top row, left to right: unidentified, Oscar Delord, Anatole Verret, Clayton Verret, Jonny Gamble, Sidney Verret, Husville Verret, unidentified, John Stockstill, Jr., Albert Stockstill, Evis Carline, Charles Ashley, Sr., Nat Smith, James Case, unidentified, Frank Seneca, Arthur Fowler, O'Neil Bruno, Agricole Theriot, John Daigle, unidentified, Felix Seneca, Sr. Second row from top, left to right: John Stockstill, Sr., George Head, Virginia Ferguson, Emma Broussard, Amanda Seneca, Leslie Verret, unidentified, Joe Seneca, Patrick Daigle, Mrs. Emile Verret Allen, Nettie Verret, Dennis Carline, Blanche Verret, Lizzie Carline, Leah Carline, unidentified, Ellen Verret, Jerome Case, unidentified, Grandmother Crowson, Emma Wisdom, unidentified, Willie Crowson. Third row from top, left to right: unidentified, unidentified, Ethel Case, Lena Gamble, unidentified, Elodie Theriot, Antonia Smith, Lilly Mendoza, unidentified, unidentified, Rose Case, Martha Allen, Annie Fowler, unidentified, Mary Daigle, Nancy Carline, Sarah Case, Kate Crowson, Laura Daigle, Lorena Larson, unidentified, Pastor Chase, Pastor Chase's daughter (playing the melodeon). Fourth and fifth rows from the top: all unidentified, with the exception of two persons in dark clothes. Baker Verret standing in white shirt, dark coat and pants; Warren Stockstill between the fourth and fifth rows in dark clothes. Courtesy of Mr. Amos Curry and Mrs. Pearl Theriot Curry.

Page 4: The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

Page 5: Photographed ca. 1950 near Pierre Part, Assumption Parish. Courtesy of Mr. William Knipmeyer.

Page 6, upper: Earth Search, Inc.

Page 6, lower: Photographed ca. 1950 near Pierre Part, Assumption Parish. Courtesy of Mr. William Knipmeyer.

Page 7, upper: The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

Page 7, lower: Photographed ca. 1950 near Pierre Part, Assumption Parish. Courtesy of Mr. William Knipmeyer.

Page 9: Based on a map prepared by Henry L. Abbot in 1863, other nineteenth-century surveys and interviews with oral informants. Earth Search, Inc.

Page 10: Back row: Carl, Henry, Charles, Agatha, Christine, Ellen, Mable, Annie, Matilda; front row: Carl "Sonny" Mendoza (son of Christine Larson), Otto, Christine's daughter, Mary, Amelia and Lottie. Courtesy of Mr. Charles Roe.

Page 11, both images: From Coulon (1888). The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

Page 12, upper: The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

Page 12, middle: Courtesy of the Louisiana Department of Conservation.

Page 12, lower: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 13: Photographed ca. 1950 near Pierre Part, Assumption Parish. Courtesy of Mr. William Knipmeyer.

Page 14, both images: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 15: Courtesy of Mr. Gregory J. Dupre.

Page 16: The putt-putts of Tom Pirie (left, upper image) and Tony Latiolatis, Belle River, Assumption Parish, 1998. Earth Search, Inc.

Page 16 and 17: Courtesy of Mr. William Knipmeyer.

Page 17, both images: Courtesy of the Simmesport Historical Society.

Page 18, upper image: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 18, lower image: Back row, left to right: Rachel Case, Mattie Larson, Dolly Verret, Myrtle Theriot. Second row from back, left to right: Mary Chauvin, Florence Chauvin, Dorothy Verret, Georgie Ferguson, Bertha Case. Third row, left to right: Victor Case, Henry Diamond, Walter Chauvin, Hervey "Hobo" Snellgrove. Lying down: Harold Snellgrove. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Pages 19: The Chauvin Store at Bayou Sorrel during the 1927 flood. Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 20, upper image: Photo by John Gasquet, taken near Pierre Part, Assumption Parish. Courtesy of the Louisiana State Archives.

Page 20, lower image: Courtesy of the Louisiana Department of Conservation.

Page 21: Left to right: Charles Roe, Winnie Roe (Smallman) and John E. Roe, children of Edd and Maude Verret Roe, on the Verret property adjacent to Bayou Jean Louis, 1932. Photograph taken by Verona Verret Richardson. Courtesy of Mr. Charles Roe.

Page 22: Courtesy of the New Orleans District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Page 22-23: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Pages 23: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 24, upper image: Courtesy of Mrs. Mary Chauvin Robichaux.

Page 24, lower image: Courtesy of Mr. Amos Curry and Mrs. Pearl Theriot Curry.

Page 25, upper image: Left to right: Eldridge Larson, Ann Carline, Ray Carline, Hazel Seneca, W.A. Carline, Bonnie Verret, Roy Seneca, Katy Snellgrove, Lynn Curry, Edith Curry and Russell Seneca. Courtesy of Mr. Lynn Curry.

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Page 25, lower image: Aubrey and Alden Curry, youngest of 14 children of Edwin and Julia (Allen) Curry, with Pennywag the dog. Courtesy Mr. Amos Curry and Mrs. Pearl Theriot Curry.

Page 26, both images: Courtesy of the New Orleans District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Page 27: Courtesy of Mr. Lynn Curry.

Page 29. Left to right: Horace Wisdom, Charles Verret, Ruell Seneca, Ray Carline and Lynn Curry. Earth Search, Inc.

Inside rear cover. Excerpts from the USGS New Orleans and Baton Rouge 1:250,000 topographic maps (1972) showing the central Atchafalaya Basin.

Rear Cover: Excerpt from the USGS Loreauville 15' quadrangle map (1941) showing the Bayou Chene vicinity.